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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANGKOK 005741

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SUBJECT: COURTING THE VOTERS IN BATTLEGROUND PROVINCES

REF: A. BANGKOK 5600 (CHARGES OF MILITARY INTERFERENCE)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 5578 (ELECTION SEASON)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: During a trip to the Northeastern stronghold of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in early November, we heard varying views of what may motivate the voters of this poor, rural region that will elect almost one-third of the members of the next House of Representatives. If the voters follow traditional patterns, they may be inclined to support MPs with long service in the district, regardless of their current party. They may also be swayed by pay-offs from politicians. Candidates of the pro-Thaksin PPP claim that the voters have now developed loyalty to Thaksin's party, and that this allegiance will trump all other factors-- a change that would work to PPP's advantage, if true, as PPP is campaigning as the true successor to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT). Candidates are all campaigning vigorously (and, in some cases, illegally). Pro-Thaksin candidates resent the activities of soldiers in the villages (there to safeguard against vote-buying and educate the voters to choose "good people," according to the authorities - ref A), but they do not appear to fear them. They are more concerned that the Election Commission will unfairly penalize them for minor campaign transgressions. The candidates we met were all highlighting their populist programs to woo voters now accustomed to benefits introduced by Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Candidate registration for the December 23 election is taking place from November 7 though 16, with many parties revamping their candidate lists up until the last minute. Nevertheless, many would-be MPs have known for some time which constituency will be theirs, and they have been campaigning as vigorously as the election regulations will allow -- and in some places, more so. Of the 400 constituency seats in the new parliament, 136 will come from the northeast, the region known as "Isaan." In addition, at least 20 of the 80 party list winners will be chosen from Isaan districts (reflecting two of the eight regional party lists.) Isaan was the stronghold of former PM Thaksin, and the region most loyal to his Thai Rak Thai party, which took 126 of the 136 constituent seats there in the 2005 election. Those former MPs are now scattered among an array of political parties; the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party appears to have gotten many of them, but others have abandoned Thaksin for more neutral parties, including the new Motherland Party and the long-established Chart Thai. Isaan is now likely to be a key battleground between the politicians who have remained loyal to former PM Thaksin, and

those who have distanced themselves from him.

MONEY AND VOTE-BUYING

13. (C) Gilded Age politician Mark Hanna said, "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is." Hanna would feel right at home in this election campaign; many politicians warn that money will play a bigger role than ever in this December's voting, and that's saying something. Money is needed for the normal range of legal expenses: posters, payments to campaign workers, advertising, transportation. In addition, money buys political success through a host of illegal measures. Money is used for plain old-fashioned pay-offs to individual voters. It's used to persuade candidates with good prospects to sign up with a particular party. It's used to fund benefits for key local officials, such as trips abroad. (We met one of our former Thai Rak Thai contacts recently, for example, who was just on the way to India with a delegation of "local officials" going to visit Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The trip had, he said, been organized by the province's administration commission, conveniently headed by his wife.)

14. (C) A recent survey reported 65 percent of voters admitted they would accept money or gifts in exchange for their vote (ref B). While vote-buying is seen as a wide-spread problem, "everyone knows" that vote-buying is particularly rife in Isaan. Poverty is one reason: Isaan includes some of the poorest provinces in the country. In addition, the Isaan voters, it is generally presumed, are honest to a fault and will stay bought once paid for their vote. During a recent

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visit to the region, we have heard other explanations of the nature of money politics, as well as indications of change.

5.(C) Several Isaan contacts told us that, while impoverished farmers are happy to get money from politicians, the money also has a symbolic significance. To the voters, the gift of money is a sign of respect from the politician. The voter does not consider that his vote has been bought; rather, he reciprocates the politicians' respect with gratitude -- in the form of an "x" in the appropriate box on the ballot. Thus, politicians and voters alike can convince themselves that they are not engaged in a base corruption of democracy, but rather are preserving hallowed indigenous customs. The hallowed customs don't come cheap. One academic in Khon Kaen province estimated that a family can take in 5,000 - 10,000 baht (usdols 150-300) during this election. (This is more than half the average monthly income in the province.)

16. (C) Discussions with a local NGO highlighted another reason that voters may take money for their vote: the perception that all MPs inevitably side with powerful interests, not the common people. The NGO has been engaged in a decades-long dispute over water rights, due to the construction of a hydroelectric dam on a local river. The activists told us with resignation that all the local politicians and MPs wind up taking the side of Thailand's electrical generating authority, which diverts "their" irrigation water into another river system. "No matter who we vote for, they all wind up playing golf up at the dam," one explained. In these circumstances, the voters might as well accept the equivalent of a day's wages in exchange for their vote, as they can expect little more from the democratic process.

17. (C) Local anecdote holds that NGOs have tried to persuade Isaan voters that they should just take the politicians' money, and then vote as they like; they have failed, it is said, because voters regards such duplicity as a sin. But we heard that this is beginning to change. Several former TRT politicians now with the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) told us that they have encouraged their constituents to

take money from anyone they like, but vote for PPP. One explained that they advised the voters to put the money overnight as an offering before the shrine in their house. Just as they can eat the leftover food after making an offering to the monks, they should take the "leftover" money after offering it to the shrine without guilt. Another candidate recounted how some of his constituents had called him to say that they had just accepted money from another party (unnamed), but were still going to vote for him.

MONEY AND LOYALTY

¶18. (C) Money doesn't just go to the individual voter. One academic described the role of payments to village chiefs, to "open the door" to the village for candidates to campaign in their villages. This is reportedly a very common practice; "Everyone opens the door," we were told. The academic said it was common for a candidate to pay up to 9000 baht (about usdols 265) to the village chief, spread out over the campaign period. In addition to gaining access to the village, this would also win the support of the chiefs, who had significant influence with local voters, sometimes serving as agents for political parties. (The village chief had paid 200,000 baht (about usdols 5900) in campaign expenses to get elected in some places, and had to recoup his investment, the academic told us.)

¶19. (C) Another axiom is that Thai voters generally are loyal to their MP, not to any party. Many MPs in the last parliament had been candidates for a bewildering array of parties over the years, but won election after election -- MPs do a robust business in constituent services, which wins them personal loyalty. They also have established networks of "vote-canvassers" - the bagmen who pay the village chiefs and local officials to support them, and who may hand out payments to the voters as well. In order to improve their election prospects, the political parties have been engaged in a bidding war to lure established MPs to be their candidates. Contacts claim that parties are paying up to 40 million baht (almost usdols 1.2 million) to sign up the politicians seen as most likely to win. One former TRT MP told us he had been offered 30 million baht (about usdols

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890,000) by Chart Thai, but with the sum to be paid out in installments (presumably, to be sure the candidate didn't take the money and jump to another party to collect another signing bonus.) While such bonuses have been paid in the past, the birth of many new political parties in the wake of TRT's dissolution, and the need to snap up strong candidates in time for the rapidly approaching polls, is reportedly driving prices up.

¶10. (C) Meeting with veteran politicians in Isaan, we heard that the importance of incumbency and pay-outs to voters may be diminishing. Candidates running with the pro-Thaksin PPP said that they believed the voters in their region would be loyal to the PPP party, not to other former MPs running on a different ticket. They said they were telling the people, "If you want Thaksin back, vote for us." They emphasized that their populist policies - the 30 baht health scheme, the village funds, the small loan programs -- were worth far more to voters than any single payment on election day, and that they had the track record of delivering these benefits to the people. (Comment: All true. End comment.)

¶11. (C) Over at the Motherland Party, however, one of the banned 111 TRT executives was not so convinced things would be very different in this election. As the ban disqualifies him from running himself, he is campaigning for his wife (with the motto: "buy one, get one free.") He agrees that the political landscape in Isaan is changing, and that party policies are increasingly important. But he believed that personal loyalty to MPs and money would both continue to play a role. Personally, he expected his Motherland Party to do

very well throughout Isaan. Motherland is headed by former TRT DPM Suwit Khunkhitti, who has a home base in Isaan, and many prominent former TRT members have signed up. Motherland will tell the voters that its party is the new home of many of the TRT leaders who implemented TRT's popular policies, and that they will continue to support such policies. But Motherland will take no position on Thaksin - neither supporting nor criticizing him. Motherland hopes to win voters to a middle ground between the pro-Thaksin PPP and the anti-Thaksin Democrats.

POLICIES ABOUT MONEY

12.(C) In this election, everyone is a populist. The 'sons of TRT' parties - particularly PPP, Motherland, and Machima Thippatai -- are offering blandishments like high commodity price supports, free education up through a bachelors degree, and the continuation of the TRT health and rural loan programs. Even the business-oriented Democrat Party is putting a populist spin on its policies, for example, promising "genuinely free" education for 12 years (i.e., free of incidental school fees). A PPP candidate told us how PPP would double the amount of funding given for micro-loan funds to villages that were successfully managing their current programs; eventually, they will develop these funds into village banks. The amounts available for small-medium-large enterprise loans were also going up. PPP supports a debt moratorium for farmers, and suspending foreclosure proceedings against those who have declared bankruptcy.

13. (C) PPP's promises are already winning them crucial support during the campaign, according to one PPP candidate in Khon Kaen province. In the rural areas, village health volunteers play a respected role in their communities, helping families ensure their children get vaccinated, or get needed medical care. PPP proposes that every "volunteer" should now get paid 1,000 baht per month (about usdols 30 - the equivalent to several days' income for a farmer) plus each "tambon" (equivalent to a county) should have a van for the use of the health volunteers. The candidate said this policy had won him the instant support of a ready-made network of health volunteers -- 10,000 of them in "his network" in his constituency. (Comment: we have heard rumors that the village health volunteers were acting as a new network of vote canvassers in some provinces; now we understand why. It is unclear how effective this policy is in other constituencies, but in Khon Kaen it seems to be very successful, according to this source. End comment.)

14. (C) While the candidates promise a cornucopia of benefits to the voters, the interim government has taken measures that are unpopular with the low-income voters. Citing one

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example, an academic in Khon Kaen complained that the interim government had ended a popular student loan program, driving his students into the arms of the pro-Thaksin PPP. He explained that, under Thaksin, all students could receive "income contingent loans" -- no requirement to pay them back until they started earning 16,000 baht/month (approx usdols 470). Most students did not expect to earn such a high salary for years, if ever, and so they were very happy to take the loans. The interim government cut off this program, and returned to the more fiscally-conservative program previously in place, which offers the loans only to low-income families.

(According to press reports, as many as 150,000 students were at least initially denied loans they expected to receive after the policy changed. In addition, new loans required re-payments to start two years after graduation, regardless of income. Revising the program took months and many students had to wait without money for tuition or for living expenses.) As a result of these problems, the academic said, Isaan students who were open to arguments against Thaksin right after the coup are now eager to support the politicians who want to bring him back.

¶15. (C) The Election Commission (ECT) had just announced its revision of the restrictions on campaign activity while we were traveling, and so the candidates were still unsure of how the changes would effect them. All parties' representatives agreed that the initial restrictions were foolish, and that they would especially disadvantage the smaller parties struggling to gain name recognition. All agreed that being able to speak to the villagers directly, in impromptu campaign stops, was very important. (Note: the revised ECT rules make this easier. End note.) Some of the candidates emphasized they were being very careful to avoid any infractions of the campaign rules. Others had a different approach. One PPP candidate had clearly put some thought into getting around the restrictions. He complained that, under the current rules, a candidate cannot make a donation to a family when he attends a funeral. He said it was embarrassing -- now he had to leave his donation in an unmarked envelope that a friend would hand over, rather than putting his own name on it. He also proudly showed us a glossy paperback with Thaksin on the cover, filled with tributes to the former PM, which he planned to distribute. We noted that the book did not appear to conform to the ECT restrictions for campaign literature (which require markings to identify how many copies were printed, and by whom). He pointed to the "125 baht" price tag printed on the front cover, saying he would hand them out, but "say that people bought them."

¶16. (C) We asked candidates and other contacts about the activities of the soldiers in the villages. An NGO told us that, in their village, the two soldiers stationed at the school, "didn't do anything," and Democrat Party candidates in the same province said that there were no soldiers active in their constituencies. PPP candidates all raised the role of the soldiers, although none predicted that their presence would have a significant effect on the voting. None reported efforts by the military to block travel of constituents or campaigners. One said that there were soldiers in every village, but "we're friendly with them." They only watched to see if the candidates broke the election laws -- but they focused, unfairly, on the activities of the PPP. A Motherland candidate said that he had not seen soldiers in the villages where he had campaigned that day, but he knew that they were in some areas. He said that the military could try to influence the voters, but "Thai society has developed" and the military cannot dictate to the voters anymore. In Chaityaphum province, a PPP candidate said that a military officer (from the Internal Security Operations Command - ISOC) was following him. Another PPP candidate said that the soldiers were watching the vote canvassers, and might videotape some of their activities. He feared that this observation could be used to support the Election Commission disqualifying him or other PPP candidates for electoral infractions, while other parties would not be as closely watched or penalized as severely. He thought that the presence of the soldiers could intimidate some voters, adding, that he used to do use the same tactic: "I would pay a friendly general," and he would post soldiers in the villages in the constituency day and night, "to intimidate

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the other side."

COMMENT

¶17. (C) With over 150 seats up for grabs in the constituency and party list races, Isaan voters will play an important role in the determining who leads the next government. If the voters stick to "traditional" patterns -- showing loyalty to their long-time MPs, and honest commitment to stay bought when paid for their vote -- the region is likely to produce a

mixed lot of winners. Motherland Party -- with many familiar faces and, apparently, an impressive war chest -- could do pretty well with its "Thaksinism without Thaksin" approach. Even the Democrats could win a few seats. If, on the other hand, the voters have really changed, if they've developed a party loyalty that trumps personal ties or money, then PPP is likely to do extremely well, as the party campaigning clearly as the inheritor of TRT's mantle.

18.(C) So far, interference from the military does not appear to have much impact, but it is still very early in the campaign, and the situation may be more difficult in more remote areas. This issue will require close attention. Even in the course of our brief visit, it was clear that politicians of all stripes are cheerfully circumventing the ECT's restrictions. As most countries have found, it is easier to pass regulations limiting money's role in politics than it is to enforce them. The provincial ECTs will not have the wherewithal to keep up with the politicians' tricks, and the adjudication of allegations of election transgressions and fraud could be protracted and contentious.

BOYCE